

The Web and the Unassailable Voice

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Abstract. In most existing art museum Web pages, the values of the museum dominate the values of the Web. Therefore, museum Web pages often electronically duplicate familiar museum products – floor plans, collection catalogues, event calendars – rather than transforming the idea of the museum by adapting the values of the Web.

This paper will seek to show how art museums and technologists can come to understand each other and use their differences productively by:

1. Orienting museum Web sites towards projects that can only be done on the Web and not on paper.
2. Using the Web to overcome the many limitations to understanding imposed by the physical art museum.
3. Using the interactive potentials of the Web to change the one-way flow of information from art museum to visitor to a two-way flow which also moves from visitor to museum.
4. Infusing the orientation towards constant change into the art museum so that the Web helps the art museum to reinvent itself.

Key words: museums, technology, education, communication, social change

Let me begin with a passage from *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, Lawrence Weschler's book on the Museum of Jurassic Technology. Weschler is describing the audio commentaries that accompany the exhibits in this strange, post-modern museum in Venice, CA. "The voice in the receiver," Weschler writes, "the same voice as in all the other receivers, it may occur to you, is in fact the same, bland, slightly unctuous voice you've heard in every museum slide show or Acoustiguide tour or PBS nature special you've ever endured: the reassuringly measured voice of unassailable institutional authority."

This Unassailable Voice has, for many decades, been an essential part of the museum experience. It is a tone and attitude that pervades museum labels, brochures, exhibitions, catalogues, the guided tour, audio-visual presentations, and now Web sites. For the most part, it is both impersonal and disembodied: it is usually not a true human voice, connected to a real identity and personality, but a bureaucratic composite, in some ways closer to an IRS form than a living art historian or scientist.

The tone or accent of the Voice varies, of course, from institution to institution. I am writing here primarily from the point of view of the art museum, which is the kind I know best. I have been involved with many kinds of museums, however,

including natural history museums and a zoo. The art museum accent can be particularly aloof and other kinds of museums speak with a cozier tone. Still, I think some variant of the Voice is nearly universal in the museum world.

Those of us who actually work in museums, of course, realize that the Unassailable Voice is a myth. Like the floating head and thundering words of the Wizard of Oz, the Unassailable Voice is created by smoke and high-tech projections, designed to hide most of the human activity and frailties behind it.

The typical interpretive art museum label, for example, is the work of a group of educators, editors, scholars, and administrators who not infrequently disagree. Even the simple line "attributed to" can, in a museum label, conceal fierce behind-the-scenes debates over the nature of the art object it purports to describe.

The words of the Unassailable Voice, for all its apparent unflappable confidence, often represent a series of compromises: compromises between the views of different experts or compromises between simple, understandable, and apparently fixed explanations on the one hand and, on the other hand, the complex and ever-changing, but richer and truer, accounts of reality. These complex and hidden accounts, however, are the ones historians and scientists actually grapple with every day of their professional lives.

Thus the Unassailable Voice has the flattened, vaguely evasive tone of a text created by committee. The voice itself often doesn't even believe or understand what it says. Sometimes borrowed from a professional presenter or actor, the voice merely mouths words of a disembodied, anonymous authority. In most cases, this authority is not the property of a single person but a group.

As you may have guessed by now, in my opinion, the Unassailable Voice is not an entirely benevolent presence in the museum. It tends to enhance the slightly patronizing, intimidating atmosphere found particularly in larger institutions, sometimes aided and abetted by their monumental architecture. This institutional atmosphere keeps some people out of museums altogether and vaguely irritates others. In its attempts to smooth over and conceal the complex and often contentious intellectual processes that really go into creating a museum, the string pullers behind the Unassailable Voice often edit out some of the most interesting and compelling parts of what a museum truly is.

The most deplorable side effect of the Unassailable Voice, the one that means that it often must be endured rather than enjoyed, is that it tends to make people feel ignorant, and thus alienates them from the entire experience of the museum. This result, however unintended, should not come as a surprise. After all, in normal life, the know-it-all who speaks in a polished, endless monologue and has no interest in the ideas and opinions of others is not so much admired as he is considered a bore.

In their first forays into the World Wide Web, many art museums have, in effect, tried to carry that Unassailable Voice into a new technology. Museum sites are gradually standardizing themselves around a formula that essentially duplicates a collection of familiar museum products: the floor plan, the exhibition catalogue,

the label, the Acoustiguide, the docent tour, and the audio-visual presentation. All of these are built around variations on the Unassailable Voice, whose message is, on a subconscious level at least, that museums have the knowledge and then benevolently dole it out to the comparatively ignorant public.

Will this approach work in this new medium of cyberspace? I suspect not. The very nature of the Web, I think, works against it.

In fact, in many ways the Web is the opposite of the Unassailable Voice. Where the Voice exudes reason and order, the Web is chaotic. Despite recent attempts to regulate it, there are no cops in the Internet. Unlike other forms of media, which require the coordination of large amounts of money and people to work, the Web is, in theory at least, open to everyone with access to a computer and a modem.¹ The Web has no particular organization, no hierarchy, no catalogue numbers. Thus the Web is like a vast library without librarians, a library that accepts any book or manuscript that anyone brings to it, puts it on its shelves, and circulates it at random.

The Unassailable Voice is the projection of timeless authority, uncorrupted by fashion, commercialism, or the relentless pace of modern life. The Web, however, is a faddish new medium and is constantly changing. What it is this afternoon it will not be tonight or tomorrow morning. In this it defies virtually all the usual guidelines of verifying and checking knowledge: it can not be rationally footnoted or checked as a reference, nor can its results always be easily repeated.

No one can predict at this point where the Web is going and what it will be a few months or years from now. It is already vast and growing constantly. It is a vast, trackless space of extraordinarily diverse information which no one can map or fully understand. It is a virtual frontier that is growing far faster than explorers can advance towards it. Is its value to society primarily as an information source or as communication? Can it be made to turn a profit? Will it stay the preserve of a small elite or will it develop into a true mass medium as television did in the 1950s, with all the pluses and minuses that that suggests?

Moreover, the Web is becoming increasingly commercial, and profit motives are gradually infecting the information there. As Brian Hecht wrote recently in *The New Republic*, "Growing numbers of Web sites conveniently ignore the old 'separation of church and state' that divides editorial from advertising in quality print publications."² Even some museum Web sites are now commercially supported and include advertising, which increasingly is the main financial support of the Web

¹ Although access to the Web is doubtless subject to the same class, race, and educational barriers presented by other media, the threshold seems to have been dramatically lowered with the advent of the Web. I have seen Internet-connected computers in small towns in New Hampshire and have heard Australians describe traveling computer centers that ply the outback settlements. Recent projects involving community access to the Web, proposed FCC rulings, and Bill Gates' recently announced major gift to facilitate computer access promise to vastly widen that access. As with so many other aspects of the Web, the long-term implications of this huge and unprecedented increase in the ability of everyone to reach everyone else on the planet are as yet unclear.

² Brian Hecht, "Net Loss," *The New Republic*, February 17, 1997, p. 16.

in general. The line between fact and ad is regularly bent and obscured in many Web sites, more so than has traditionally been true of, for example, newspapers and broadcast news, where it is usually easier to tell what is news and what is a commercial.

Most importantly, the Web is an environment where fact and fiction blend and meld. As Brian Hecht points out, on the Web, “it is impossible to know where information comes from, who has paid for it, whether it is reliable and whether you will ever be able to find it again. A student looking for information on the Internet about, say, World War II, cannot know whether a given ‘page’ has been posted by a legitimate historian or by a Holocaust revisionist.”³

In a recent story about misinformation in *The New Yorker*, Burt Andersen points out that the very accessibility of the Web has its downside. On the Web, he writes, “not only is every citizen entitled to his or her opinion but he or she is entitled to deliver it instantaneously, studded with chunks of fake information, to the whole world. With a computer and a phone line, anyone can become his own publisher/commentator/reporter/anchor, dispatching to everyone everywhere credible-looking opinions, facts, and ‘facts’ via the Internet. . . . Thanks to the Web, amateurism and spuriousness no longer need look amateurish or spurious.”⁴

Until someone invents a system of authentication parallel to the ones that have grown up around print media, the tendency of the Web to always put “fact” between quotes will continue.⁵ Even when such systems are in place, however, the suspicion of spuriousness will likely cast a shadow over every Web site, no matter how reputable its name and purported origin; it is simply too easy, on the Web, to mimic the gloss of institutional authority. Early surfers of museum Web sites will recall, for example, that the original “Louvre Museum” Web site had nothing to do with the famous Paris institution: it was created entirely by a French computer engineer. For some time, it was the only Louvre Web site and, despite its disclaimers, undoubtedly misled many visitors into believing it was official.

For many, foraging the Web for knowledge, in its present immature state, can be a hazardous experience. The current search engines do not discriminate the gems from the dregs. For example, when I searched the Web recently for information on the Pyramids of Giza, the very first site the search engine turned up was an authoritative-looking site with impressive diagrams and quotations from prominent Egyptologists and PBS programs.

³ Hecht, loc. cit., p. 15.

⁴ Kurt Anderson, “The Age of Unreason,” *The New Yorker*, February 3, 1997.

⁵ Several ideas have already been put forward for “branding” or “authenticating” Web sites in various ways. Jane Sledge of the Getty Information Institute has suggested that museum sites might include an ‘AAM’ accredited museum logo linked to a place on a Web site managed by the American Association of Museums. No matter what system is devised, I would argue that the Web’s subversion of the norms of authority separate it fundamentally from makes the Unassailable Voice possible: the assumption of truth based on what amounts to tone and delivery rather than substance.

Only by penetrating to the very bottom of this site and moving to its author's homepage⁶ do you realize it is put together by a gentleman from Georgia, depicted in a ten-gallon hat, who also offers information on such subjects as the I Ching as conveyer of genetic code, parallel universes, the extraterrestrial entities known as the "massless lightcone beings of the luminous dharmata," and the nature of time as "a holographic interference pattern". This Web site concludes with the assurance that "the internet is the most effect way ever devised for ideas to be communicated among humans. You might even regard ideas as life forms living on a human-internet substrate."

In fact, mystical prophecies about a hidden Hall of Records at Giza and New Age theories about pyramid power and the extraterrestrial origins of ancient civilizations predominate in Web sites about ancient Egypt. The same is true of other popular subjects. Many such Web sites seem to occupy an odd, unfocused realm between fact, fantasy, and satire. Some of the strangest sites can also be some of the most fascinating and most difficult to interpret.

As I said above, I believe the qualities of World Wide Web I have just described make it fundamentally hostile to the Unassailable Voice. The tone of institutional authority that has been the essential medium of museums for decades will not easily cross the barriers of modems and HTML where all authority yields to a kind of electronic leveling.

This is not to say that museums won't try, aren't trying, the transition. It is not to say that they might not create the illusion of a successful transition. But I believe it does mean that museums must find a new voice for the Web, one that does not rely on blind faith and Oz-like illusion to authenticate its authority. It is no longer possible or responsible to present "facts" over the Web without first admitting the medium's vulnerability to falsehood and distortion. On the Web, everyone is the Wizard of Oz.

This state of affairs may be difficult for many museum officials to swallow. Museums have relied so long on the Unassailable Voice and its barrage of invulnerable facts that it has become part of their identity. It has thus become difficult for them to imagine other paths to knowledge.

As they learn more about the Web's tendency to meld facts and authority, some museum officials will undoubtedly try to shut out the Web altogether. This will not solve the problem, of course, as new technologies have a way of making their presence felt everywhere, almost like a force of nature. It is also not desirable, as I think that the World Wide Web has a great potential, one not yet fully exploited, of changing the partly falsified monologue most museums carry on with the world into an infinitely richer and truer dialogue. It will mean abandoning or greatly modifying the tone of the Unassailable Voice, but, as I have already suggested, the Voice itself is not always a welcome or positive presence for everyone.

⁶ Currently located at <galaxy.cau.edu/tsmith/TShome.html>, after a previous location on the Web was "taken over" by the wizard Mordred.

What might a museum Web site look like without the Unassailable Voice? Let me suggest three basic principles that might guide it. The core idea behind these principles is that the medium should be used for what it can do that other media cannot do: it should not merely duplicate what has traditionally, and probably more effectively, been done in print.

First, the museum site should always be built with the assumption of change and provisionality. The Web is constantly changing and is never complete. Museums, although they tend to ignore this, are the same. Not only do the exhibits and the physical plant of the museum change, its collections change, and, more importantly, its understanding of the meaning of those collections changes. Unlike the catalogue card for a book, the information about an object in a museum collection is constantly being revised. Art works are reattributed to new artists, X-rays reveal other images below the surface of a painting. Scientific specimens in a natural history museum are constantly being reclassified and the significance of, say, a fossil jaw from the Jurassic, may change abruptly with new information, a new discovery, or a new theory. Museums, although they try hard not to admit it, are in a constant state of revolution.

The Web has a great potential for reflecting this process of change and reevaluation because it can so easily be updated and modified. A physical exhibition takes months and years to organize and present. Information on the Web can be changed in a few minutes. New scientific developments can be documented as they happen. For example, images of the recently discovered cave paintings in the Ardeche region of France were transmitted around the world within a few days of the discovery, thanks to the Web.

Exhibitions and other temporary phenomena in art museums can similarly be quickly mounted and presented to the world. The Dia Art Foundation in New York, for example, uses its Web site to present artist installations that physically exist at its various exhibition sites. Museums could also use the Web to present an exhibition as it is developed, or to present day-by-day reports of an object as it is studied by a group of scholars and scientists.

Exploiting the temporary and provisional nature of information on the Web in this way has another important benefit: it shifts the relationship between the Web and facts, which can easily be falsified there. By changing the nature of truth from the fixed state of the Unassailable Voice to a process over time, which is far closer to what really happens with the development of knowledge, the Web can build a process of self-validation. If the steps in the process of building information are logical and hang together, they will tend to be self-validating. They will also teach a far more powerful lesson on the nature of information: that it is subject to a constant process of challenge and checking against other information. This is a lesson that needs to be taught about our entire system of knowledge in this electronic age.

Second, the Web should exploit its powerful ability to be interactive. Not long ago, I came across a message that asked for advice about dealing with the “problem”

of questions coming into a museum Web site from its public. Apart from the logistics, I would suggest, this is not a problem but an enormous opportunity.

Museums have traditionally ignored an important aspect of communication: that communication is not a monologue, but a dialogue. In order for true communication to exist, information must pass from both sides, like a conversation, so that each side can check and question the message.

Museums are almost unique among educational institutions in that they still are using a one-sided method of communication. This is unlike the relationship between a teacher and his students, for example, which is two-way: the teacher presenting information, the students responding with questions; the teacher testing how the information comes across with exams, the students responding with answers; the student making the information their own with papers and projects, the teacher evaluating how effectively that information has been absorbed.

Museums largely by-pass this feedback approach. As a result, they lose an enormous amount of information about their visitors and their likes and dislikes, information that any business would consider invaluable and essential for its survival. Such an ivory tower approach has often left museums out of touch with their public, and, I think, left them vulnerable and unprepared to deal with the wave of controversies that have engulfed public funding for museums in recent years. As any successful business knows, constant two-way responsive communication with your clients is a prime way to build trust and confidence, and to give yourself a margin of tolerance should problems arise.

With only a monologue between them and the public, museums are also less likely to adjust ineffective methods of communication and can miscommunicate on a grand scale. Let me use a small example from my own museum, the Davis Museum and Cultural Center, which is on the campus of Wellesley College. When the Museum was built three years ago, a small gallery off a much larger gallery of twentieth-century art was set aside for Wellesley's small but choice collection of African art. This was, in fact, the first art museum gallery in the Greater Boston area devoted to African art.

African-American students on the campus, however, interpreted this gallery differently. They saw the African collection's separation as segregation, and the gallery's relatively small size not as a reflection of the size of the collection but a judgment on the importance of African art relative to Western art. In other words, they saw the entire arrangement as yet another racially-based narrative of exclusion and implied inferiority – a message that, needless to say, the museum never intended to communicate.⁷

⁷ It might be argued here, as one of my readers pointed out, that *intention* is an ambiguous term in this context: that, as contemporary social critics often argue, the inherent racism of Western institutions leads it to subconsciously present a continuous narrative of Western superiority no matter what their stated aims might be. The epistemology of institutional racism is a gigantic and complex topic too large to address in this paper. Suffice it to say, at this point, that the Davis Museum's conscious efforts were to be as culturally sensitive and politically correct as possible. Despite these efforts, however, the communication was otherwise.

I believe this sort of unfortunate and unintended miscommunication takes place every day in museums for the very reason that there has, until now, been no easy way to check up on how the words of the Unassailable Voice are actually coming across in the world. The Web's interactive capabilities can change that dramatically. For example, in a special project designed by a Davis Museum intern, the Web and the campus computer network are being used to help plan the exhibit of an Ashanti seat soon to be given to the Davis Museum collection. Through the network, students, scholars, and curators will discuss the meaning of the object and the extent to which it was shaped or reinterpreted by European imperialism in Africa. A special Web page will present the object, perhaps in the context of other art works, and will feature a more elaborate written discussion about how best to display the work and explain its meaning. Eventually, this discussion will help shape how the Ashanti seat is shown in the museum.

Third, museums should exploit the Web's ability to look below the surface, to present the layers of knowledge that museums have not previously been able to show the public. Because of its ability to organize large amounts of information in a relatively compact area, the Web opens up possibilities that the simple, and necessarily deeply abridged, museum label can never do.

For example, in collaboration with Professor of Classics Miranda Marvin, we created a special label project on our museum Web site and on a computer installation in the Davis Museum's classical galleries. The project used more than a century of research on a single object in the collection: a classical sculpture sometimes known as the "Wellesley Athlete," to explore the gap between what is known about an art object by museum officials and scholars and what is typically presented to the museum's visitors.

Professor Marvin named this project "Truth in Advertising" because she believes most museum labels for classical sculpture are out-of-date and deeply misleading. In the "Truth in Advertising" Web site, visitors were able to click on phrases of the original label for the Wellesley Athlete to learn more about the research and scholarly attitudes behind each term. In the process, they could explore how museum labels can distort and even conceal the truth about an art object and its history.

Projects like "Truth in Advertising" are only a small foray into what I see is the great potential of the on-going collaboration between museums and the World Wide Web.⁸ This collaboration, properly directed, can not only bring the wealth of museums to a far wider audience, it can help replace the traditional "Unassailable Voice" with one that is kinder, gentler, less pompous, more interesting, and, ultimately, far more inspiring.

⁸ Perhaps prompted by the issues automatically raised by the use of new technologies like the Internet, museums have already begun to examine some of the assumptions underlying the Unassailable Voice. Jane Sledge has outlined some of the results in a paper on the "Points of View" project of the Getty Information Institute and the Consortium for the Computer Interchange of Museum Information. Ms. Sledge's paper was presented at the 1995 ICHIM Conference and is available in the conference proceedings.

Marshall McLuhan, whose long neglected ideas seem to have taken on new significance in the era of the World Wide Web,⁹ emphasized that new media can only be understood through the transformations they bring to society; the content of these new media he saw as camouflaging their true effects. In a 1974 interview, McLuhan summarized his position: “If we understand the revolutionary transformations caused by new media, we can anticipate and control them; but if we continue in our self-induced subliminal trance, we will be their slaves.”¹⁰

I have hinted, in this paper, at the sort of transformations that the dramatic increase in access to and interactivity of the World Wide Web are causing and explained why I think they render the old, content-based Unassailable Voice obsolete. Ironically, I think museums – institutions heavily invested in the past – are potentially in a good position both to understand these future transformations and make good use of them. In doing this, museums can also take leadership in shaping the Web to benefit the advancement of knowledge around the world.

⁹ Coincidentally, the last thing I wrote before beginning work on this paper was a review of the new book on Marshall McLuhan which I quote below. Oddly, McLuhan’s observations often seem to apply even more directly to the wired and digitized 1990s than they did to the 1960s, when he made them.

¹⁰ Paul Benedetti and Nancy DeHart (eds.), *Forward through the Rearview Mirror: Reflections On and By Marshall McLuhan* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), p. 198.